

Working title

A Fascination With Our Dead: Addressing the Discord Between Modern Music and Museum Culture

Project Purpose

The music of living composers often does not make it into mainstream concert programs but that is not because it has less merit or is incapable of being enjoyed by audiences. Figuring out why this is the case will be the first step to remedying the problem.

Project Importance

If composition is going to persist as a viable art form, we must stage an intervention and bring the composers into alignment with the patrons (and vice-versa). This does not necessitate dumbing down the music or forcing audiences to take college courses in music appreciation, but at the very least both groups must understand each other. This is a complicated endeavor and it has not been achieved satisfactorily as evidenced by the fact that modern music is not programmed with the same level of enthusiasm as the music of dead composers. (If you need more evidence for that simply attend your local symphony). Since art is always in flux it would be historically foolish and presumptuous to claim that things are the way they are because they *ought to be so*. This project will hopefully pull apart a perplexing issue facing musicians today and offer ideas to groups interested in remedying the problem.

Project Overview

In the Oxford History of Western Music, Richard Taruskin describes the evolution of our current classical music landscape: namely a fascination with dead composers and a less than enthusiastic reception for everything else. He points out that "the symphonic repertoire as purveyed in the latter half of the nineteenth century...had been frozen at the century's midpoint."¹ What happened at this time was that 80% of the music played in the European capitals was from the dead composers (most recently Beethoven) and the remaining 20% was by contemporary composers who were "counter-historical" in that they were simply creating epigones of the old canon.² What stemmed from this was a musical society that put contemporary composers in a box; their creative offerings were now interpreted by "a relationship to the past, rather than...a relationship to the future."³ Their creative expression was

¹ Richard Taruskin, "Chapter 13 The Return of the Symphony" in "Music in the Nineteenth Century" (New York: Oxford University Press, n.d.), Retrieved 29 Aug. 2018, from <http://www.oxfordwesternmusic.com/view/Volume3/actrade-9780195384833-div1-013002.xml>

² See William Weber, "Mass Culture and the Reshaping of European Musical Taste, 1770–1870," *International Journal of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music* VIII (1977): 5–21.

³ Taruskin, *Return of the Symphony*

damned by an ever backward looking musical society. Interestingly this cultural attitude toward music made way for offshoots. It was here that “popular music” had a birth, being by definition whatever art music was not: “not meant for permanent display but for instantaneous, ephemeral success.”⁴ The two genres were defined more by their opposition to each other than by any proactive traits. Art music composed by living composers that was not in the image of the traditional canon and also not “popular music” inhabited some misunderstood space in between. It seems to have resided there since.

We, the inheritors of this musical tradition, are left to reconcile adverse musical camps. How are we to do this? There are a number of contemporary performing groups that are working aggressively to strike this balance but it is a challenge because of competing interests. As Taruskin points out, the museum culture surrounding music was economically motivated (and still is). The reason the old greats formed a canon was because that is what concert going people wanted to hear and so that is what was consistently programmed. How does a group balance supporting the creation of new music and also appeasing of audiences if that’s not what they enjoy hearing? To answer this question requires an intimate knowledge of both spheres: artists and audiences. This project is an effort to explore both of those camps and bring them into harmony.

As an initial look at the audience side, Carolyn Boiarsky’s article, “This is Not Our Fathers’ Generation,” published in *The Journal of Popular Culture*, discusses extensive research done into the attendees at the Philadelphia Orchestra.⁵ Admittedly, this is not a study about living vs. dead composers. However, the balancing act of programming music and attracting audiences is still the root of this research. Findings indicated that audience members who had previous musical experience, either from school or private lessons were more likely to be purchasers of season passes. (Similarly, it has always seemed to me that other composers are the people most interested in hearing new compositions). This suggests that familiarity, nostalgia, loyalty, and personal identity are all possible factors in an audience’s enjoyment and understanding of music. As president of the BYU School of Music’s student association I worked closely with the BYU PR department to run an inaugural campaign for the BYU student arts pass. We looked at attendance data and audience attitudes to inform an advertising campaign that would attract students to classical music. Our focus groups and surveys similarly indicated that prior experience was a key indicator. In an interview I conducted with Carlos Botero, Ambassador for the Houston Symphony, he explained ways that the HSO attempts to address this audience attribute. In one instance they filmed a video describing aspects of the piece and why it was significant. This type of exercise springboards the audience, giving them valuable context that allows them not to feel so out of place when they hear the music that follows. It now has meaning. While they were not necessarily *familiar* with the pieces being played, this type of

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Carolyn Boiarsky, “This is Not Our Fathers’ Generation: Web Pages, the Chicago Lyric Opera, and the Philadelphia Orchestra,” *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 36, 1, 2002, 20.

priming serves to *familiarize* them. I anticipate that further research will unearth similar clues as to how a thoughtful artistic director could address audience needs and desires.

The point of my project is to discover ways of changing an audience's experience for the better in a concert setting. The assumption that I'm making is that a poor audience experience is the reason that living composers aren't in the limelight. The discussion of museum culture above serves to point out that preference, however fickle or random it may be, is the deciding factor in the success or failure of art. The music of living composers is viewed differently than traditional classical music making it somehow less desirable; maybe it doesn't have the benefit of being recognizable, perhaps it's not as cool, it lacks societal value of some sort, it's not discernable or it's not enjoyable enough. Whatever the reason, it fails to grab the attention of large audiences, creating little or no economic advantage and thus struggling to achieve status. If we can improve the audience's experience then it would follow that increased popularity of contemporary music will follow.

So how do we go about improving an experience? The first step is to understand what it is exactly that the audience is expecting.

- Audience preferences in a technological generation. Our generation is affected by the increase in technology. How does this play into the way we consume media? What about our attention spans? Do we rely on a visual understanding rather than an auditory one? There is much research on millennials and the impact of technology on how they process information that will be a good starting point.

I've pinpointed a few other avenues to pursue in answering the question of how to improve an experience:

- How education and context play a role in the overall understanding and enjoyment. Again there are large amounts of educational research on this subject. The key will be distilling principles and seeing how they can apply in a musical setting.
- Any research done on audiences of symphony orchestras (Boiarsky)
- How did we get to the point we're at now where the music of dead composers is arbitrarily put above that of the living? Were there legitimate reasons that we can use to backsolve a solution? Oxford Encyclopedia of Music is a good start in addition to many other articles.

To augment the insights gained from my research I'll look at groups that focus on the music of living composers and see how they are answering these questions. By selecting a few groups as case studies, observing their concerts and speaking with their artistic directors I'll be able to begin to catalogue what they are trying to do to make the music approachable to a more general audience, what appears to be working and what doesn't. I will then distill some of the ideas from these examples and create a case study of my own by attempting to apply some of those techniques in a concert that I'll organize here in Utah. The audience members will be asked to rate their prior experience with music, how they perceive classical music, how much they enjoy it, etc... Then after the concert they will fill out a survey that will give insight into the following:

- Audience's understanding of purpose of the music presented

- Audience comfort and orientation in concert setting
- Improve audience's ability to interpret art
- Did they think that it was "cool"

From this we can deduce how effective the artistic efforts were.

I anticipate that the final product will be around 40 pages discussing the research, giving an analysis of the concert case study, and discussing insights gained through the whole process.

Qualifications of Thesis Committee

Neil Thornock: In his artistic pursuits, Dr. Thornock primarily considers himself a performer/composer. Thornock's works have been described both as "richly scored, moving, resonant" and as possessing "cool understatement". They have received performances in various venues, including NASA, SEAMUS, SCI, Imagine 2, Eccles Organ Concert Series, and San Diego State University. Indiana University ensembles recently premiered O years! and age! farewell for choir and orchestra as part of the opening concert of the Midwest Composers' Symposium. In 2004, he was awarded a Barlow Commission which resulted in a 35-minute double bass solo, premiered at Indiana University by Nathan Wood. Additionally, his music for carillon has garnered several international awards and has been regularly performed at congresses of the Guild of Carillonneurs of North America since 2001. His compositional prowess is evidence of his interest contemporary music and its continued support. I worked with Dr. Thornock for a year as part of the BYU School of Music's Executive Council where we tried to strengthen the culture in the school of music and create meaningful experiences for faculty and students. There I was impressed by the thoughtful way he approached problems and by his willingness to try new things. If we are to make ground in changing the culture around contemporary music it will require a deeply experimental attitude.

Eric Hansen: Eric Hansen has been more involved in my musical education at BYU than any other faculty member. As my private teacher, I have met with him on at least a bi-weekly basis for music instruction during all my years at BYU. Eric is uniquely positioned as he had a successful career as an orchestral musician with the Richmond Symphony and the Winnipeg Symphony orchestras prior to teaching at BYU. He understands firsthand that sphere and how it has tried to cope with the adoption of contemporary music. He has also participated in festivals highlighting contemporary music including the duMaurier Arts New Music Festival. He performed the Winnipeg premier of a contemporary work for Bass and Orchestra by John Deak and, as a composer himself, has made many additions to the double bass repertoire. While his career has focused on more traditional classical music, he has had unique exposure to contemporary works and can offer valuable insight.

Project Timeline: IRB is not applicable to this project. My interviews and surveys are classified as case studies and do not require approval.

Basic timeline for this project is as follows:

- Beginning of Fall semester
 - Do academic/historical research
 - Begin researching professional groups of interest that are doing interesting things and start setting up interviews and visits
- Mid Fall Semester
 - Interview members of professional groups and attend specified concerts
- End of Fall Semester
 - Synthesize things that I learned in the bulk of the thesis. Draw conclusions and use information to create small concert experience
- Beginning of Winter Semester
 - Have small concert experience
 - Finish off thesis by adding section about experience with the concert, the audiences reception, things I learned from the experience.

Funding

For the research portion, in addition to interviewing people from various music groups I will travel to some of them and see it in action. I intend to use close to the full \$1000 dollars for these travel expenses. Any remaining monies will be used during the concert portion. I'm anticipating that the concert will require the purchasing or renting of equipment and possibly rental fees for a space. As both the groups I will visit and the nature of the concert are part of the discovery my project, I cannot be more specific as to where I am going and what exactly I'll be doing. Specific plans will be made with Dr. Thornock as things progress. I have begun making plans to travel to San Francisco in December to attend a concert at the *SoundBox*. That is however tentative at this point.

needs more detail plus approval.
[Signature]

Culminating Experience

As I finish my thesis I hope to present at relevant conferences. The first conference I am looking at is the Rocky Mountain Chapter of the American Musicological Society that meets in March.